

Indigenous Politics in Canada: The Predictable Political Non-Answer

Rebecca Carrick

This paper analyses the platforms of the three central parties (Progressive Conservatives, Liberal, and New Democratic Party) in the 2015 Canadian Federal Election, specifically referring to their proposals for addressing Indigenous politics. This paper illuminates the failure of all parties to put forward a comprehensive platform that acknowledges the systemic problems, and works towards permanent solutions to the state of living and relations with Indigenous peoples. Instead, each party focuses on the more visible, resulting effects. This method can only lead to further stigmatization from mainstream Canadians who are provided with only a limited discursive framework, in which to view Indigenous politics.

The topic of Indigenous politics has long since been a controversial topic within Canadian Politics. For the purpose of this essay, the term Indigenous politics encompasses adversities Indigenous peoples face, Indigenous interests, and their influence upon Canadian politics. Canadian politics is separated from Indigenous politics, not to imply that the Indigenous interests do not belong within the contemporary Canadian framework, but to highlight the specific interests that Indigenous peoples hold, which require a distinct space of emphasis. Contemporarily, a plethora of constitutional and political roadblocks encapsulate the overarching categorization of Indigenous Politics. These matters are often back-benched in Canadian politics in lieu of issues that hold more benefit to the state. Through this essay, I intend to focus upon the platforms of the three front running parties, Canadian Progressive Conservatives (CPC), New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Liberals, in relation to Indigenous Politics. I argue that no party has put forth a sufficient plan to amend the profuse amount of issues, in fact, I argue that the chosen solutions will serve to deepen the root of the issue at hand.

The points that each party commits to are important; however, they reject acknowledgement of the fundamental derivation of the controversies. The parties' interests run similar in focus, generally only

diverging in dollar amount commitment¹. Education reform, and infrastructure improvement in reservation schools take significant amounts of platform attention, as well as the commitments to help advance some reservations' access through initiatives such as the construction of the road for Shoal Lake 40 First Nations². However, these issues seem to have ulterior motives, as portrayed by The Liberal leader during the Maclean's National Leaders Debate. Justin Trudeau states the Conservative leader and sitting Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, "hasn't been working with First Nations on the kinds of partnerships that are needed if we're going to continue to develop our natural resources."³ This statement interprets that fixing relationships out of respect and repentance towards the Indigenous peoples, is of no importance. Rather it works to fund the colonial mindset, that is still prevalent in Canada particularly towards Indigenous peoples⁴ about how this exploitative undertaking would be an opportunity for the Canadian government to increase economic capacity.

Furthermore, the current platform proposals are set to fail because they reflect previous governments', in the fact that their solutions largely involve throwing money at issues⁵, and isolating reform strictly to reservations. Historically, even with the substantial amounts of monetary funds that Indigenous societies are provided, the state continues to fail. The presence of extreme poverty, poor healthcare, educational failure, and abuse reports, have developed into a detrimental feedback circle⁶ which has become the central source for the mainstream Canadian discourse surrounding Indigenous peoples. The unsympathetic sentiments of frustration and resentment can be considered an appropriate response given the limited discursive framework that the government has provided for understanding Indigenous politics. It is understandable that the public concludes negative stereotypes when the Canadian leader announces, on the international stage, that Canada has "no history of colonialism"⁷. This statement serves to repeal the Canadian government of blame for the ailments that have faced Indigenous societies, and falsely affirm them as a product of racial inferiority. "This view is exacerbated by the media and politician rhetoric about the general hopelessness or corruption of [Indigenous] communities and [Indigenous] peoples. This environment provides an absolutely no-win position and sets up the conditions for nurturing deep resentment."⁸ With the current federal parties committing

¹ Tim Fontaine, "An indigenous guide to the 2015 federal election: Who are the indigenous candidates and what are the parties offering indigenous voters?", *CBC News*, posted August 06, 2015, last Updated September 21, 2015, accessed October 7, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/an-indigenous-guide-to-the-2015-federal-election-1.3179421>

² Tim Fontaine, "An Indigenous Guide to the 2015 Federal Election"

³ "REPLAY: Maclean's National Leaders Debate", YouTube video. 34:50, posted by "Maclean's Magazine", August 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSf2__qpeGA

⁴ Carol Schick, "*I Thought Pocahontas was a Movie*": *Perspectives on Race/culture Binaries in Education and Service Professions*, (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2009), 135-141.

⁵ Jesse Kline, "Jesse Kline: Killing aboriginals with our kindness", *National Post*, May 14, 2013, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/jesse-kline-3>.

⁶ Joe Sawchuck, "Social Conditions of Aboriginal People", *Historica Canada*, Ed. Anne-Marie Pederson, Velvet Maud, David Koch, posted October 31, 2011, last Updated March 4, 2015, accessed October 8, 2015. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/native-people-social-conditions/>.

⁷ Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, *Approaches to Aboriginal Education in Canada: Searching for Solutions*, (Canada: Brush Education, November 12, 2013), 30.

⁸ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (Dunedin: Zed Books and University of Otago, March 15, 1999), 92.

higher amounts of funding, and a predictable outcome, this will only serve to increase the resentment and fundamental racism towards Indigenous peoples. The first step to reconciliation, is to break these false conceptions with a proper acknowledgement of the severity of the crimes of the past, and how the consequences are still pertinent in the current generations. An uncontradictable apology must be made, on a national and international level, that does not degrade any reparations made towards Indigenous peoples.

The subsequent action would be to reevaluate focus of the issues addressed in party platforms. The Canadian government needs to speak to the overarching, fundamental failure, which is the systematic implementation of oppression of Indigenous peoples in Canada. The lack of narratives around Canadian historical assimilation, and a denial of crimes committed against Indigenous peoples, has ultimately cultivated the prejudice discourses that are present in contemporary society. Under these conditions there can be no recognition given to intergenerational trauma from the measures taken, such as the enactment of Indian Residential Schools, which aimed to disenfranchise Indigenous peoples. Intergenerational trauma refers to the “processes by which the experience of trauma in one generation can influence subsequent generations”.⁹ This means, the issues faced by parents, who were victims of assimilation, often consequently have adverse negative impacts on children. Though, in Canada, these programs are often taught of, in primary schooling, the severity of the programs are greatly undermined. They are also widely painted as problems of the distant past; not acknowledging that the last seven Indian Residential Schools closed between 1995 and 1998.¹⁰ If a society actively chooses to forget, and believes ‘the past is in the past’, it does not consider the undertaking of enormous collective trauma by an affected group, which then leads to the development of negative stereotypes. This can only be reformed through a comprehensive education of mainstream Canadian citizens about the impacts of past stigmas and how they are perpetuated in the present.

The final inadequacy of these three federal parties, is that they do not attempt to reaffirm the traditional culture of Indigenous peoples. The NDP¹¹ and the Liberal¹² parties have stated commitments to work with Indigenous communities on a nation-to-nation basis, but what is this supposed to mean? Through subjugation, Indigenous culture has largely been perceived as shattered and squandered, and has become a source to feed the ‘white saviour’ complex. Unless this perception of needing to be ‘fixed’ is reformed, implementing a nation-to-nation process, will only serve to perpetuate this perception. Overall, the narratives surrounding Indigenous culture needs to be changed. A focus must be made to reaffirmation through the emphasis of the fundamental positive nature of the culture that is deep rooted in respect¹³. It is also important to recognize “the dynamic, adaptable nature of both culture and

⁹ Amy Bombay, Kimberly Matheson and Hymie Anisman, “The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma”, *Transcultural Psychiatry vol.51 no.3*, (2014): 321, accessed October 7, 2015, DOI: 10.1177/1363461513503380.

¹⁰ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume One: Summary: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future By The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada”, (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, July 27, 2015), 70.

¹¹ “Tom’s Plan: A New Relationship with Indigenous Communities”, New Democratic Party of Canada, Accessed October 7, 2015, <http://www.ndp.ca/platform>.

¹² “The Platform”, Liberal Party of Canada, accessed October 7, 2015, <https://www.liberal.ca/realchange/>.

¹³ Edward J. Brantmeier, Jing Lin and John P. Miller, “Spirituality, Religion, and Peace Education”, (Carolina: Information Age Publishing, 2010), 135.

identity”¹⁴ in order to advocate reassertion through the agency of the peoples. Not to encourage Indigenization, but rather, instill the right of Indigenous peoples to their own culture, through self-determination.

What is required to make steps to lasting, positive change, is to change the discourse surrounding Indigenous politics through three methods: proper acknowledgement and apology of history, widespread education of the continuing consequences of that history, and a change of narrative away from the negative stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, and towards a framework that emphasizes the beauty of what the culture was and what it can return to be. The current plans of the Federal Parties, to simply throw money at the Indigenous issues that gain enough identification, is a cop out attempt at reconciliation. The concerns they are acknowledging are extremely important, but the method of approaching them only has a short-term effect and will predictably serve to further the negative views of the mainstream public. The problem cannot be fixed by the effects, only once the cause is addressed, will the effects begin to cease refabricating.

¹⁴ Avigail Eisenberg and Jeff Spinner-Halev, “Minorities Within Minorities: Equality, Rights and Diversity”, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, January 3, 2005), 290.

Works Cited

- Bombay, Amy, Kimberly Matheson and Hymie Anisman, "The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma", *Transcultural Psychiatry* vol.51 no.3, (2014): 320-338, accessed October 7, 2015, DOI: 10.1177/1363461513503380.
- Brantmeier, Edward J., Jing Lin, John P. Miller. *Spirituality, Religion, and Peace Education*. (Carolina: Information Age Publishing, 2010). 135
- Eisenberg, Avigai, and Jeff Spinner-Halev. *Minorities Within Minorities: Equality, Rights and Diversity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, January 3, 2005).
- Fontaine, Tim. "An indigenous guide to the 2015 federal election: Who are the indigenous candidates and what are the parties offering indigenous voters?". *CBC News*. Posted August 06, 2015. Last Updated September 21, 2015. Accessed October 7, 2016. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/an-indigenous-guide-to-the-2015-federal-election-1.3179421>
- Kline, Jesse. "Jesse Kline: Killing aboriginals with our kindness". *National Post*, May 14, 2013. Accessed October 8, 2015. <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/jesse-kline-3>
- Liberal Party of Canada. "The Platform". Accessed October 7, 2015. <https://www.liberal.ca/realchange/>
- Maclean's Magazine. "REPLAY: Maclean's National Leaders Debate". YouTube video. 34:50. Posted by "Maclean's Magazine". August 6, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSf2__qpeGA
- New Democratic Party of Canada. "Tom's Plan: A New Relationship with Indigenous Communities". Accessed October 7, 2015. <http://www.ndp.ca/platform>
- Sawchuck, Joe. "Social Conditions of Aboriginal People". *Historica Canada*. Ed. Anne-Marie Pederson, Velvet Maud, David Koch. Posted October 31, 2011. Last Updated March 4, 2015. Accessed October 8, 2015. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/native-people-social-conditions/>.
- Schick, Carol. *"I Thought Pocahontas was a Movie": Perspectives on Race/culture Binaries in Education and Service Professions*. (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2009). 135-141.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. (Dunedin: Zed Books, March 15, 1999). 92.
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. "Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume One: Summary: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future By The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada". (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, July 27, 2015). 70.
- Widdowson, France and Albert Howard. *Approaches to Aboriginal Education in Canada: Searching for Solutions*. (Canada: Brush Education, November 12, 2013).